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## Soyinka's The Road as Ritual Drama

### Abstract

There is evidence in Soyinka's poems that the theme of 'the road' has a personal significance. It is the Muse of the first section of *Idanre and other Poems* ( 1967) entitled 'Of the Road'. In the prefatory note to 'Death in the Dawn', Soyinka explains that he was inspired by a real event:

## Soyinka's *The Road* as Ritual Drama

There is evidence in Soyinka's poems that the theme of 'the road' has a personal significance. It is the Muse of the first section of *Idanre and other Poems* (1967) entitled 'Of the Road'. In the prefatory note to 'Death in the Dawn', Soyinka explains that he was inspired by a real event:

Driving to Lagos one morning a white cockerel flew out of the dusk and smashed itself against my windscreen. A mile further I came across a motor accident and a freshly dead man in the smash.<sup>1</sup>

The cock as a sacrificial offering for divination and propitiation is accessible enough here; but later in the poem, the lines

May you never walk  
When the road waits, famished

have only a superficial meaning for the reader who is unaware that Soyinka is saying that it is Ogun, the god of the road (in Yoruba cosmology) and not simply the road itself, that waits, famished. Ogun is hungry for food, whatever its form, whether humans slain by accident, or dogs (his favourite meat) deliberately killed by his taxi-driving devotees.<sup>2</sup> All these ideas are deeply explored by Soyinka in *The Road*. It is not accidental that Samson in this play is made to repeat word by word the same plea in 'May we never walk when the road waits, famished'.<sup>3</sup> This deliberate coincidence betrays Soyinka's fascination with the predatory quality of 'the road'. This beast of prey which lies in wait is a monstrous man-eater: an inescapable doom.

Soyinka's exhortation not to 'walk when the road waits,

famished' seems cold and remote. In any case, it is irrelevant because Man is a pilgrim who must travel:

Traveller, you must set out  
At dawn (*Idanre*, p. 10)

With cold impersonality Soyinka further tells us of the horror on the life-eating road:

We walked through broken braids of steel  
And fallen acrobats. The endless safety nets  
Of forests prove a green deception  
Fated lives ride on the wheels of death when,  
The road waits, famished (*Idanre*, p. 64)

By contrast, 'In Memory of Segun Awolowo' is a sign of the poet's sorrow as he laments his intimate friend. Here, Soyinka does not contemplate Death in the abstract. 'The sting of personal loss prevents the possibility of looking with indifference on the strange arithmetics of Death: Death is not an abstraction, but a concrete foe'<sup>4</sup>:

The road, the aged road  
Retched on this fresh plunder  
Of my youth (*Idanre*, p. 14)

During the early sixties Soyinka was compelled to travel constantly on the dangerous road linking Lagos to Ibadan. On many occasions, he witnessed road fatalities and other accidents whose frequency caused him to fear for his own life. He accepted his duty, yet dreaded that the next turn on the road would be his last. This may explain why he was spell-bound by the road as an agent of death.

The 'personal relationship' which he developed with 'the road' can be understood in terms of this attraction to, and fear of, death. Putting his anguish and deep-rooted fear of death in verse form, Soyinka purged the terror resulting from death's embrace. But in so doing, he pays a tribute to 'the road' with all its religious and ritualistic connotations. 'The road' is an 'asphalt god' whose

favours the poet propitiates. This literary deification of 'the road' is a typical innovation of Soyinka. It finds its deepest expression in his third long play *The Road*.

I have tried so far to indicate the significance of 'the road' in Soyinka's private life. The playwright himself says in a magazine interview that

*The Road* is based on what I might call a personal intimacy which I have developed with a certain aspect of the road. . . . *It concerns the reality of death.* It is a very strange personal experience which developed out of my travels on the road. It was almost a kind of exorcism writing that play.<sup>5</sup>

This offers an insight into the sources of the play and the real meaning of 'the road'. *The Road* centres on the *reality of Death*. It is on this allegorical level its significance must be understood.

The realistic title of the play can be misleading if we take it at its face value. The play is deeply rooted in Soyinka's Yoruba culture. The many references to Yoruba concepts and realities in *The Road* are evidence that a knowledge of Yoruba traditions is necessary to understand the full meaning of the play. Soyinka's literary output is an exposition of a specific worldview which originates from his African background, his sound knowledge of other cultures (Asian and European in particular), and his own research into Yoruba cosmology. He has selected in his native culture a few central tenets which he exploits extensively in his works. And conversely, he tries to reinterpret the entire Yoruba vision of the world in terms of these central tenets. Besides his own theory known as 'The Fourth Stage', Soyinka has explored two particular beliefs in *The Road*: the 'Abiku' concept and the 'Ogun' myth.

The 'Abiku' concept originates in the traditional African belief of 'the wanderer child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother'. It is incarnated by Half Child in *A Dance of the Forests*. Half Child is a strange baby who is no sooner born than all it desires is to die and be born again:

I who await a mother  
Feel this dread,

Feel this dread,  
I who flee from womb  
To branded womb, cry it now  
I'll be born dead  
I'll be born dead<sup>6</sup>

The Half Child is a symbol of the wish for death and the failure of hope.<sup>7</sup> In *Idanre*, the 'Abiku' figure appears in two poems: in 'Abiku' and in 'Season'. As its name indicates, the poem 'Abiku' is dedicated to this ageless child who scorns all sacrifices and rituals:

In vain your bangles cast  
Charmed circles at my feet  
I am Abiku, calling for the first  
And repeated time (*Idanre*, p. 28)

The idea that life is a cyclic reincarnation is central to the 'Abiku' poem. A belief in the cyclic nature of creation predominates in the African traditional worldview. I do not suggest that this is peculiar to the African conception of the world: parallel beliefs are found in other cultures. The Asian belief in Dharma and Karma (cosmic ordering) as well as the belief in the transrational in some Western mystic societies, testify to its universality. Many Western writers and thinkers have explored this notion of the cyclic reincarnation: Nietzsche's famous analysis of the 'Recurring Cycle' is one example.

The 'Abiku' is the Yoruba version of this universal belief according to which death is not the end of life. Communication with the beyond is feasible because life and death are two facets of the same cosmic reality. In the context of this time-structure, the periodicity of the existences of the dead, the living and the unborn is a basic principle. In other words, the worlds of the ancestors, the living and the stillborns are neither uni-directional (chronologically-speaking), nor are they separated by impervious walls. Instead, there is a link between these different worlds which are believed to coexist permanently.

The cyclic process of life and future reincarnation (central

tenets of Soyinka's Yoruba cosmology) are illustrated by two examples from *The Road*. It is in terms of Abiku's flouting the traditional struggle to preserve life that Professor describes the riverside where the accident has taken place:

Below that bridge, a black rise of buttocks,  
two unyielding thighs and that red trickle  
like a woman washing her monthly pain in a  
thin river. *So many lives rush in and out*  
between her legs, and most of it a waste (*The Road*, p. 197 – my italics)

Earlier in this scene, Kotonu asserts that the lorry which overtook them at the bridge was full of faceless passengers (virtually dead bodies). But Professor records this testimony in his own enigmatic words. His insistence that the lorry was 'pregnant with stillborns' stresses the traditional belief that those who are dead will be born again. This idea that life is an eternal repetition is also basic to the poem 'Season'. The line 'The ripest fruit was saddest' which appears in it is a restatement of the notion that life, at its fullest, is closest to death.

Soyinka does not treat the 'Abiku' theme as a separate entity. He deeply explores the paradoxical idea which has it that life is in death and death is in life. The very choice of the road as the setting in which his characters evolve and the constant promiscuity of death, recall Soyinka's own experience as I mentioned previously in this essay. Similarly, *The Road* is permeated with the consciousness that life is always on the brink of death and death is on the brink of life. Professor, the main character whose constant groping towards the essence of death is central to the play, sleeps in the nearby graveyard, 'among the dead'. The drivers' praise song emphasizes Professor's position between the living and the dead:

Professor, our being like demon  
Professor, our being like demon  
The elder above us  
The elder below us  
The hand that thinks to smash me, let it  
pause awhile

I have one behind me, coiled snake on Mysteries  
He moults in season, coiled snake on Mysteries (*The Road*, p. 231)

This praise song leads us to the myth of Ogun. It is exactly in these terms that 'the wanderer child' in the poem 'Abiku' boasts that it will return as 'the suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep' and that its mother's will be 'the killing cry'. There is a reference to this tail-devouring snake in the poem 'Idanre'. We later find it again in Soyinka's collection of essays, *Myth, Literature and the African World* as the 'Möbius Strip'. This symbol is an insignia for Ogun who wears a decoration round his neck as a symbol of the doom of eternal repetition. At this point, the 'Abiku' figure (cyclic reincarnation) completely fuses with the Ogun divinity (doom of eternal repetition).

As the myth of Ogun is central to *The Road*, it is necessary to recount Soyinka's Yoruba cosmogony as explained in *Myth, Literature and the African World*. The Yoruba myth of origin has it that the realm of infinity was the natural home of the unseen deities, the resting place for the departed and a staging house for the unborn. This is, in Soyinka's terminology, the 'chthonic realm' or the storehouse for the creative and destructive essences.

In ritual drama (that is in drama as a cleansing, binding, communal recreative force), this realm was periodically breached by a human representative for the well-being of the community. In other words, the Yoruba (like the Asians and the Europeans before the advent of cosmic Manicheism) existed within a cosmic totality. His own earth being, his 'gravity-bound apprehension of self' was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. In this traditional world vision, the cosmos did not have the 'grandeur' of the infinite which Pascal proclaims in *Les Pensées*. But the tangible and the immediate were part of its attributes. As a result, it was possible for Man, through vicarious experiences, to reach an understanding of or to come to term with, the world around him.

Yoruba cosmogonic wisdom is embodied in the proverb: '*Bi o s'enia, imale o si*' (if humanity were not, the gods would not be).<sup>8</sup> This is the best expression of the humanness that characterizes the relationship of the Yoruba with the Ifa Pantheon. Also specific to



all Yoruba deities is that even when they bear the essence of purity, their history is always marked by some act of excess (hubris) or other kind of human weaknesses. Sango, the god of lightning and punitive justice, is depicted as weak, treacherous and disloyal. Obatala, the essence of quietude and forbearance, the god of soul purity, had a conspicuous weakness for drink (palm wine). The act of 'hubris' leads to a disruption of the balance within nature. Complementarity between man and god is lost. Some kind of penance is exacted from the god responsible for this disruption of the cosmic ordering. The gods are brought within the cycle and continuity of cosmic regulation involving the worlds of the ancestors, the living and the unborn. These are referred to by Soyinka as the rites of passage which ensure the constant regenerative process of the universe.

Ogun's history, as it appears in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, is a fascinating story of the completion of Yoruba cosmogony. He is the first god of the Ifa Pantheon to have travelled through the 'chthonic realm' (the primordial marsh or abyss). It was the gods who came to men, anguished by a continuing sense of incompleteness, needing to recover their long-lost essence of totality. They were led by Ogun, the combative hunter who had visited earth before and knew how to smelt iron ore and forge technical instruments. His action united gods and men and inaugurated the harmonious Yoruba world in which gods and men live side by side. This aspect of Ogun as the first darer and explorer is what Soyinka regards as central to the Yoruba concept of drama.

Ogun is equally known as the 'protector of orphans', the 'roof over the homeless' and the 'terrible guardian of the sacred oath': he stands for humane but rigidly restorative justice. Being the first explorer, Ogun is regarded as the god of creativity (associated with the harvest season and the rains). But paradoxically, because of his metal weaponry, he is also the god of death and war.

This dual nature of Ogun, as the embodiment of the creative-destructive essence, has not been retained by Soyinka in *The Road*. Only the violent and destructive aspect of his nature are deeply explored in the play. It is in his quality of the reluctant leader of

men (in 'Idanre') and of the scrap-iron dealer (in 'In Memory of Segun Awolowo') that Ogun presides over the hideous car smashes in *The Road*. He greedily slaughters animals (preferably dogs) and people alike. He is a demanding god and the roads provide abundant meat for his diet. Samson implores the driver of 'No Danger No Delay':

Kill us a dog Kotonu, kill us a dog.  
Kill us a dog before *the hungry god*  
*lies in wait* and makes a substitute  
of me (*Idanre*, p. 198)

The lorry drivers are Ogun's devotees and they propitiate his favours by constantly killing dogs for him. Ogun lives on death and needs feeding regularly. The Driver's Festival is his festival and its origins go back to the god's rite of passage (a re-enactment of Ogun's venture). In *The Road*, Soyinka uses this Festival with tremendous dramatic effect: Ogun is the patron god of the drivers and the heart of this play's meaning lies in an event which took place at the last drivers' festival.

Deriving from the myth of Ogun is the fourth area of existence which Soyinka calls 'The Fourth Stage'. This is the dark continuum of transition where the inter-transmutation of essence-ideal and materiality occurs (*MLAW*, p. 26). This middle ground (a sort of no-man's land) belonging neither to the world of the flesh nor the spirit, is where Soyinka has set the meaning of *The Road*. He propounds that Ogun's venture through the primordial chaos succeeded thanks to his wilful nature which rescued him from the 'precarious edges of total dissolution' (being torn asunder by cosmic winds) (*MLAW*, p. 30). This, in the playwright's vision, is the unique essentiality of Ogun in Yoruba metaphysics: as the embodiment of the social, communal will invested in a protagonist of his choice.

In *The Road*, the concept of the state of possession by the spirit of the mask is minutely explored in both religious and psychological terms. The actor in ritual drama prepares mentally and physically for his disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin; he experiences the transitional, yet inchoate ma-

trix of death and being. Such an actor in the role of the protagonist becomes the unresisting mouthpiece of the god (MLAW, p. 30). The opening lines of the 'Alagemo' poem help to indicate that this passage between death, freshly dissolution and arrival in the other world is the area which Soyinka explores in *The Road*: 'My roots have come out in the other world'. We expect and find a steady sinking down towards the other world, visually represented by the Egungun mask that spins and falls when Professor finally meets death in the closing scene.<sup>9</sup> Professor wants total knowledge of death (by holding the god in Murano 'captive') and without dying himself: 'I cannot yet believe that death's revelation is total, or not at all'. It is in these terms that he expresses his faith that his quest will be successful. 'The Word' he has been seeking all along is 'the essence of death'. 'The road' in this context symbolizes the proverbial road of life through which all mortals must travel. But Murano cannot yield the secret of 'The Word': he is in a transitional state and although closest to the spirit world (he has one foot in each world and is actually dying or gradually sinking towards complete dissolution), his knowledge of 'The Word' is incomplete and inexpressible: 'The Word may be found companion not to life, but to Death'. One cannot gain the forbidden knowledge and stay alive.

Soyinka's vision of art is mythically-based. His conception of drama, in particular, is revealed in *Myth, Literature and the African World* in the following terms:

Ritual theatre... aims to reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces... , even the so-called realistic or literary drama can be interpreted as a mundane reflection of this essential struggle. Poetic drama especially may be regarded as a repository of this essential aspect of theatre; being largely metaphorical, it expands the immediate meaning and action of the protagonists into a world of nature forces and metaphysical conceptions. (MLAW, p. 43)

Here is a clear expression of what Soyinka has achieved in *The Road*. The existence of a gulf (abyss) to be bridged is crucial to the Yoruba cosmic ordering. The gulf is what must be diminished by

sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies of appeasement to the cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf (MLAW, p. 31). Drama is therefore an assertive link with a lost sense of origin. This helps to explain why Soyinka's themes are often infused with Yoruba mythology and religious sentiment. Soyinka does not put so much emphasis on social details. His interest in fantasy, myth and universal issues is conspicuous in almost all his works. There is, unmistakably, an underlying social indictment in *The Road* as the play gives a picture of some aspects of contemporary Nigeria (the police, the civil service) as being thoroughly corrupt. But more often than not, Soyinka works within a traditional system which allows him to explore the problems of creation and existence from a philosophical and mythic perspective. With him there is no problem of nostalgia, of melancholy recollection of a dying world and no problem of authenticity. He is imaginatively engaged with a tradition that still happens to be alive.<sup>10</sup>

The 'Egungun' cult which is alluded to in *The Road* is the special custodian of the ancestral spirits. These spirits, together with the indwelling spirits of the inanimate world are like the Yoruba gods. They are believed to possess enormous power and they must be treated in the proper ritualistic manner. Say Tokyo's injunction that 'you gorra do it proper' originates from the traditional belief in the disastrous consequence which attends the non-observance of proper ritual.<sup>11</sup> Having failed to observe this rule, Professor ultimately meets death in the closing scene.

When the wearer of an 'Egungun' mask experiences possession, he performs the ritual dance with perfect skill. The dance is 'the movement of transition' as we learn from the 'Alagemo' poem. Both the dance and the mask are tangible means of connection with the other world. The spirit of the dancing mask is held in a hiatus while the ancestral spirit (or the spirit of a god) takes over. The dancing mask is in a continuous communion with the other world and this helps to explain Professor's interest in Murano who functions as Ogun's mouthpiece and might yield 'The Word'. The drums and the dirges stylistically underline the meaning and heighten the dominant emotion. Soyinka's use of masks and drums and his inclusion of dirges serve to make *The Road* an

elaborate dance of death.

I have pointed out earlier in this essay that the writing of Soyinka is an allegorization and that one should always look for a deeper level of significance. Soyinka constantly thinks in terms of Yoruba myths. The presence of the ancestors ('Egungun') and of the Yoruba gods ('Ogun') is sacramental in *The Road*. Sometimes Western mythology is brought in (the mystical function of palm wine recalls the rite of communion), betraying Soyinka's biculturalism.

Soyinka's characters invariably exemplify the particular Yoruba religious view. One such example is Say Tokyo Kid. In the true tradition of a Chicago gangster, he is addicted to hemp and sells his services for any kind of dirty work. He nevertheless shares basic Yoruba beliefs: he feels that the only reason why he has not yet been in an accident is because he understands and treats the spirit within the timber properly. We recognize here the traditional Yoruba belief that none of the external world is essentially inanimate. This fearful reverence makes Say Tokyo an instrument of the gods.<sup>12</sup>

Because he has chosen to explore the arrest of time, Soyinka works with modernist techniques. This movement back and forth in time together with the lack of focus is found in the avant-garde theatre. Like the dramatists of the absurd, Soyinka prefers to articulate an ethical no-man's land. The clowning and the paronomasiac dialogue belong to this genre.<sup>13</sup> As a result, there are constant flash-backs and shifts and the narrative seemingly has no logical sequence. The characters speak different levels of language (Yoruba-Pidgin-English). Although Professor's English is perfect, his meaning remains inaccessible (his words being broken down and incoherent). *The Road* is Soyinka's most modern and mature work fusing the mental and the physical into one cathartic movement.

## NOTES

1. Wole Soyinka, *Idanre and Other Poems* (Methuen, London, 1967), p. 10. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold* (Cambridge U. P., 1962), p. 53.

3. Wole Soyinka, *The Road* in *Collected Plays I* (O. U. P., London, 1973), p. 199. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. Francis Katamba, 'Death and Man in the Earlier Works of Wole Soyinka' in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. IX, No 3, April 1975, p. 65.
5. Rex Colling, 'Wole Soyinka: A Personal View' in *The New Statesman* 76, 20 December 1968, p. 879. The italics are mine.
6. Wole Soyinka, *A Dance of the Forests* in *Collected Plays I* (O. U. P., 1973), p. 64.
7. James Gibbs, 'The Origins of *A Dance of the Forests*' in *African Literature Today* No 8 (Heinemann, 1976), p. 67.
8. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge U. P.), p. 10. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text with title abbreviated to *MLAW*.
9. Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold*, p. 229.
10. Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold*, p. 51.
11. Margaret Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons* (Macmillan, London, 1968), p. 51.
12. Margaret Laurence, *ibid.*, p. 51.
13. Annemarie Heywood, 'The Fox's Dance: The Staging of Soyinka's Plays' in *African Literature Today* No 8, *ibid.*, p. 43.